

EDUCATION WEEK

## SPOTLIGHT

## On Classroom Management

*Editor's Note:* Classroom management is often one of the most challenging parts of the job for new teachers. This "Spotlight" explores how educators can create successful learning environments in sometimes difficult situations.

Some articles featured in this Spotlight were written by members of the Teacher Leaders Network, and first appeared as columns in Teacher Magazine. The views expressed in articles by the Teacher Leaders Network are the authors' own and do not necessarily represent those of Editorial Projects in Education.

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*Published July 22, 2009, in Education Week's Teacher Magazine*

# How to Use Leftover Class Time Wisely

By Larry Ferlazzo

One of the first lessons I learned when I began teaching was to "overplan." Assume that your lesson is going to be done early and have a related activity ready to go.

However, like many important lessons—exercise daily, don't eat sweets in abundance, practice patience—it's not something I always manage to make a priority.

But I do have the next best thing—a list of constructive learning activities that I can use anytime I finish my lesson early and have a few minutes in need of wise investment. To beef up my list, I also asked readers of my blog to share ideas of their own.

My thoughts (and theirs) fall into seven categories: Review, Summarize, Relate, Reflect, Intellectually Challenge, Technologically Engage, and (a student favorite) Chill.

## Review

Research has shown that you have to see a new word five to 16 times (and in different contexts) to really learn it. Studies differ on the number of times we need to review a new piece of information before it's ours—but it's more than a few. Review is one good use of those extra minutes. Teachers review in a variety of ways. Math teachers

who left comments on my blog like to play quick games on the whiteboard that require little or no extra planning. Second language teachers (myself included) talked about having students sing vocabulary songs. Sometimes I'll just have students break into pairs and quiz each other. To add a little intrigue, you might have Student A give the answer and ask Student B to supply the question, Jeopardy-style.



## Summarize

Rick Wormeli has written an excellent book called *Summarization In Any Subject: 50 Techniques to Improve Student Learning*, which provides a wealth of research (with plenty of practical suggestions) that demonstrates the importance of having students summarize what they've been studying.

Here are a few activities (mine and his) that I have students complete in a learning log:

- What are three things you learned?
- What is the most interesting thing you've learned?
- Imagine a simile or a metaphor about what we learned today.

Wormeli's book charts all 50 of his techniques and indicates which techniques are short "sponge" activities that soak up transitional time.

## Relate

Gladys Baya, an English teacher in Argentina, usually has students review the lesson on their own during any extra time, but she also sets a priority for herself. She has brief chats with students with whom she hasn't had much interaction that day.

I think this kind of relationship-building is a critical part of what turns a classroom of students into a community of learners, but it's easy to neglect in the midst of covering the curriculum. I also have students in my classes ask each other a series of questions about their preferences, goals, families, and the like. In the first few months of class, I make sure all students have had the opportunity to have these kinds of conversations with everyone else. Those few spare moments after the lesson has ended are great opportunities to do so.

## Reflect

When Hannah Arendt observed the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Holocaust, she wrote that she had expected to see a monster. Instead, she was shocked to see a man who was mechanical, bureaucratic, and thoughtless. Might evil, she wondered, often be the result of the absence of thought and reflection? The everyday lesson I take from this story is that if we don't learn to think and reflect as we're growing up, we can become

mechanical and live our life by a formula.

So it's important, I believe, to regularly reinforce the value of reflection with our students. It's not something that comes naturally to most people, and certainly not to children.

The way that I've gotten my students to reflect is by asking questions like:

- What, if anything, would you like to change about yourself, and what is one thing you can do tomorrow to start?
- Describe one moment in your life when you felt you learned something important (practically no student of mine has ever written about something that happened in school).
- What do you do well, and what helps you be successful in doing it?

Of course, you never know what you're going to hear when you pose these kinds of questions. When I asked my students, "How would your parents describe you?," one student responded: "My mom would want to know why my teacher was asking about her daughter."

Reflective questions, of course, can also directly relate to what happened in the classroom that day.

One teacher, who only left the name "Edna" on my blog, said she takes what's she learned from Project Zero, a Harvard program that studies multiple intelligences, and asks her students:

- How does today's learning connect to what you already knew?
- How did it extend your thinking further?
- What questions do you still have?

## Intellectually Challenge

Kelly Hines, a 4th grade teacher in North Carolina, uses a book of five-minute mysteries to challenge her students to use their inductive and deductive reasoning skills to solve a mystery.

I've used similar activities called "lateral thinking puzzles"—a term coined by Edward de Bono to describe indirect approaches to problem solving. These are very short mysteries that require students to think outside the box. A quick search on Google will uncover many examples that you can use in your classroom.

## Technologically Engage

If you happen to be in the computer lab (or if you're teaching a class where all students have Web access), many teachers have created Web sites that have links to engaging and reinforcing learning activities. Students can be easily directed to specific sites or given freedom to roam links on a page you've created or previewed.

Learning games are always useful, and you can find a listing of my favorite online educational games on my Web site. Another technology-related activity that's a winner is having students create something that can be posted on the Web. You might review my choices for *The Best Ways To Create Online Content Easily & Quickly — 2008*. Two criteria I used in creating that list were that (1) it allowed students to create something in just minutes, and (2) it required little explanation.

## Just Chill

Teachers are only human, and there are a few days that I'm done early and just need a few minutes to catch my breath and prepare for the next class. On those rare occasions, a you-may-stay-seated-and-talk-with-your-neighbors-until-the-bell-rings is always an option. Your students might appreciate a breather, too.

I was never a Boy Scout, but their motto—"Be Prepared"—has been good advice for 100 years and more.

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*This article was published in Teacher Magazine as part of a partnership with the Teacher Leaders Network.*

Published August 12, 2009, in *Education Week's Teacher Magazine*

# How to Organize for Learning

By Marti Schwartz

Organizing a classroom in a way that works for both the teacher and the students is a daunting task. But, oh so worth it. Putting structures, routines, and procedures in place allows a class to run more smoothly, which means more learning can take place. Helping a class to learn the routines may be time-consuming, but it certainly pays off in the long run.

Exactly how does it help? Peek through the door:

## Possible Scenario #1:

**L**uckily, I got in early today, so I have plenty of time to get ready and put this morning's start-up work on the board.

But, first there's a note in my mailbox to call a parent, so I do. I spend 10 minutes confirming the field trip arrangements for which I'd already sent a note home.

Time to pick up the kids waiting in the cafeteria. As we leave for the classroom, a colleague asks if we could switch preps (my kids will go to art first today) because she has to attend a meeting. Sure. I'll write it down when I get upstairs.

But upstairs, I discover that I never did write the start-up activity on the board, so I begin to do that. Then, Mikey interrupts me because he has no pencil.

On the way to get him a pencil, Kelsey gives me a note from her mom, and then I go back to writing the start-up on the board.

Mikey again: Oh — right — you need a pencil.

On the way to get him a pencil, Albert comes up to me and tells me he doesn't have his homework. We have a little chat.

Looking up, I notice that

the kids haven't started their work. I go back to the board to finish writing the day's first assignments. I see that Joseph is still unpacking — Joe, do you need my help? Let's put your backpack away, homework folder out, and get the day going!

Mikey, why haven't you started your work? Oh — the pencil.

As I walk back to my desk for the pencil, I'm seeing that most of the kids have their homework out, which is good, but Angela is talking to Jenna instead of working. Angela, what's up?

"I don't feel so well," she says. And then up comes breakfast.

I dash for the wastebasket, hit the intercom for our janitor, and look around for those gloves I'm supposed to be wearing when bodily fluids are in play.

Hmmm ... I know there's something I'm supposed to write down, and something I'm supposed to get for someone, but I sure don't know what they are .... The kids have been in school for exactly 20 minutes, and I'm exhausted already. Unfortunately, I doubt anyone has learned much yet this morning!

## OR...Possible Scenario #2:

**I** get to school early, which is always a good thing. Even after a few weeks here, I've come to see that you never know what unexpected events may derail you.

My eyes do a quick check of the room: the start-up I wrote on the board before I left for the weekend is still there. Pencils are in the pencil can, homework book and problem book are on the table. I set tonight's homework in the spot where two kids will pass it out (along with any parent notices that arrive during the day) at 2:40 p.m. Everything is in place.

I look at the Monday bin to be sure I have all the materials I need for the day. Filling the bins on Friday afternoons really makes the next week go a lot smoother.

When the intercom buzzes for a parent phone call, I sigh and head down to the office. I spend 10 minutes confirming the field trip arrangements for which I'd already sent a note home, but I can spare the time — and I'm appreciative that the parent is coming along with us.

Time to pick up the kids. On the way out of the cafeteria a colleague asks if we could switch preps because of her meeting.

Once we get upstairs, I greet the

kids at the door, and notice Angela looks a little pale. Kelsey has a note for me, and I advise her to have Zoe explain where it goes. I watch the kids unpack, set out their homework, and put their belongings away.

Our classroom routines are well-established, I can see, as Mikey gets a pencil, Albert signs the homework book, and the kids pick up their start-up papers and get to work. Joe needs some help getting organized, so I stop by his desk for a minute.

Glancing around I notice that Angela hasn't started working, so I move toward her. "I don't feel so well," she says. And, sure enough, here comes breakfast. I quickly move a wastebasket closer, while grabbing my plastic gloves which are hanging next to my desk (along with band-aids). Then, I move towards the intercom to call the janitor.

Happily, everyone else is pretty occupied, though admittedly the kids around Angela are a little grossed out. Nonetheless, I can see the value now in having routines — the class practically runs itself!

Oh, and here's Karen from downstairs, with a note from Mrs. Martinelli, reminding me of that prep switch. She knows, as I do, how hectic mornings can be!

## Lesson learned?

Imagine the first 15 minutes of your day as a play: putting coats and backpacks away, handing in homework, getting necessary materials, starting an assignment, handing in notes from home, even heading off to the bathroom. How can 25 kids accomplish this without conferring with you each step along the way? Script the actions you want to occur, set procedures in place, and TEACH them, so that your students will be able to follow a routine independently, no matter what comes along.

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*This article was published in Teacher Magazine as part of a partnership with the Teacher Leaders Network.*

*Published December 12, 2007, in Education Week*

# Ed. Schools Beef Up Classroom-Management Training

By Vaishali Honawar

**F**aced with concerns that too many teachers are entering the profession unprepared to manage classrooms, some colleges of education have in recent years increased their focus on training aspiring educators to handle disruptive students.

New teachers, even if skilled in academic subjects and pedagogy, often find themselves grossly unprepared to deal with student misbehavior. Discipline issues are one of the primary reasons given for teacher attrition. In fact, a 2003 study by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, a Washington-based advocacy group, found that more than 25 percent of teachers who left the profession cited student discipline.

"Many teachers don't stay beyond three years, and one of the reasons behind that is you have a behavior problem on the part of the students, and then you have a teacher who is ill-prepared in handling the students," said Rosalind LaRocque, an assistant director of the American Federation of Teachers.

"We hear from teachers, and especially younger teachers, that classroom management is a huge challenge," said Dina Hasiotis, the director of education policy for the Washington-based group Common Good, a legal-reform group that tracks student-discipline issues. Meanwhile, schools are getting larger and can be disorderly, she said.

While candidates for jobs in special education have traditionally been offered courses in classroom management, it is only in the past decade that colleges appear to have started responding to the need for more training for general education candidates as well.

One such program is a partnership between Cleveland State University and Temple University, in Philadelphia, called Conflict Resolution Education in Teacher Education, or CRETE. The program, whose creators say it is the first national under-

taking to integrate sustained conflict-resolution training into a teacher-preparation program, offers five-day-long workshops to better prepare teacher-candidates for classroom-management issues they will face on the job.

At the University of Cincinnati, a mandatory classroom-management course has been built into each teacher education program since 2000.

## Only Your Memories

Pamela Wise, a coach for the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest/Small Schools Project in Seattle, Wash., spent 32 years as a teacher. She remembers that when she graduated from Portland State University in 1968 with a major in English and a minor in education, no courses in classroom management were offered to general education students.

"You only had your own memories of your high school classroom when you walked in as a classroom teacher," she said.

On the other hand, Jill Ballou, who started her first job this year as a 6th grade teacher at John Eaton Elementary School in the District of Columbia, said she was required by her teacher program at Champlain College in Burlington, Vt., to take at least two specific classroom-management courses. She learned about creating responsive classrooms, recognizing diverse cultures and backgrounds, and identifying behavior-modification strategies, among other skills.

That training, she said, helped her greatly. "At our school, we certainly have a number of behavior issues," she said.

Ms. Wise agrees that while a few schools appear to be doing a good job in training candidates in classroom management, not every teacher is coming into the classroom well prepared in the subject.

Experts say teacher colleges—as well as

school districts—have traditionally lagged behind in responding to new challenges, such as the changing atmosphere in classrooms.

"I don't think our education systems have caught up to the complexity of the social problems that children bring into schools," said Greg Greicius, the senior vice president for educational initiatives for Turnaround for Children, a nonprofit group based in New York City that partners with some colleges and school districts, including New York, to train school personnel in responding to students' academic and behavioral needs.

## Clamoring for Help

But advocates for teacher colleges say the perception that colleges have been inactive in preparing new teachers in classroom management is wrong. For instance, they point out that all colleges seeking national accreditation are required or expected to include classroom-management training in their coursework.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education requires that teacher-candidates understand principles of effective classroom management as well as human motivation and behavior. NCATE accredits more than half the 1,200 teacher colleges and programs in the country.

"If you ask teacher-educators, classroom management would be one of the things they think they do the most preparation in," said Carol Smith, the vice president for professional issues and partnerships at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, which is also based in Washington.

A more recent trend, she said, is to embed classroom management prominently in candidates' clinical experiences, so that the student-teachers make a connection between theory and practice.

But observers say the demand they see for classroom-management training among new teachers has not diminished, which suggests to them that candidates are still not being prepared adequately.

The AFT and its affiliates offer professional-development training, and both the national union and some locals now offer programs specifically aimed at helping new teachers grapple with classroom discipline.

"We still have more people clamoring for classroom-management training than ever before," Ms. LaRocque said.

The growing demand for better teacher training in student discipline has spawned a number of groups that offer teacher colleges and school districts their expertise in preparing such courses.

The Classroom Organization and Man-

agement Program, or COMP, which was created by a now-retired professor at Vanderbilt University, has for a decade partnered with school districts, including Milwaukee. In recent years, officials of that Nashville, Tenn.-based organization say they have seen a surge of interest from colleges of education as well.

Inge Poole, a national trainer for COMP, said that more education professors have started attending their Training for Trainers workshops, which prepare them for crafting and implementing classroom-management courses.

The program offers research-based training, both for aspiring and full-fledged teachers, in such areas as maintaining good student behavior, managing student work, and planning and organizing. So far, 40 teacher-educators have attended those courses and gone on to set up programs in classroom management at their own universities, officials said.

## A Stimulating Environment

Those who run programs that offer comprehensive classroom-management programs say the focus today is not just on dealing with difficult students, but also on fostering an atmosphere that promotes collaborative learning.

William S. Newby, an academic adviser and lecturer at the education college at Cleveland State University, said one of the topics he deals with in the CRETE workshop he teaches is helping teacher-candidates understand how they can develop a collaborative classroom.

"This involves learning how to hold classroom meetings to address classroom problems," Mr. Newby said. "In meetings, students are invited to take some ownership over classroom rules and procedures, learning goals, and ways of better working together."

"The classroom experience then becomes more of a team experience," he said, "and many potential discipline problems are resolved through peer influence."

During clinical experiences, too, student discipline is one of the elements that field supervisors address in their observations of student-teachers and in

## Sorting Out Conflict

Conflict Resolution Education in Teacher Education, or CRETE, is a program that trains teacher-candidates in classroom management. A partial list of concepts and skills it imparts includes:

MAJOR COMPONENT	CONCEPT TO BE TAUGHT	SKILL TO BE TAUGHT
Understanding conflict	Functional and dysfunctional conflict	Identify constructive and destructive conflict
	Sources of conflict	Identify conflict triggers in self and others
Understanding emotion in conflict	Understanding link between emotion and conflict	Building emotional vocabulary Reading others emotions
	Understanding role of emotions in escalating and de-escalating conflict	Identifying emotional triggers to conflict Using the emotional escalation/de-escalation ladder
	Understanding anger	Self-soothing/calming strategies
	Facilitating reappraisal of conflict through emotional awareness	Using questions to identify feelings Using questions to work through conflict
Communication	Active listening	Paraphrasing, summarizing, listening for feelings, and perception checking
	Nonverbal communication	Recognizing nonverbal triggers in conflict
	Cultural difference in communication	Adjusting to cultural differences in language Adjusting to cultural differences in communication
Problem-solving	Achieving consensus	Learning six levels of consensus Facilitating group discussion to consensus
	Conflict styles	Recognizing conflict styles Matching conflict styles to the situation
	Interest-based negotiation	Recognizing interests and positions Questioning to uncover interests behind positions Exploring options/brainstorming Principled negotiation
	Mediation	Mediation
Conflict management as a classroom tool	Creating collaborative community in the classroom	Creating class officers Negotiating class rules Using class meetings
	Cooperative discipline	Recognizing discipline and punishment Developing logical consequences for behaviors Using nonpunitive language

SOURCE: Tricia Jones, Temple University

follow-up conferences with teacher-candidates, Mr. Newby added.

Candidates at the University of Cincinnati take mandatory classroom-management courses tailored to special education, middle school education, and the like.

"We found our students knew a lot, they knew the content, but it doesn't help much if you don't come in with a working knowledge of the system in a classroom," said Anne Bauer, the NCATE coordinator at the university.

"We needed courses, depending on the individual program, that really helped students develop a classroom-management plan: What are the routines they are going to have; what are the strategies they are going to use to engage everybody?" she said. "Because when students are engaged, they are not acting out."

Published October 1, 2007  
in *Education Week*

## BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

### "Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom"

By Vaishali Honawar

A practice guide for teachers recommends a mix of strategies to combat student behavior problems in elementary school classrooms, including steps teachers can take on their own and by tapping resources from outside the classroom.

The guide, released by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, calls on teachers to identify the specifics of problem behavior and the conditions that reinforce it. Then they should modify the classroom learning environment to decrease such behavior, and teach and reinforce new skills to increase good behavior, the guide says.

The report also recommends that teachers draw on relationships with colleagues and students' families for guidance on improving behavior.

Lastly, it asks teachers to assess whether schoolwide behavior problems warrant adopting broader strategies and programs in the school as a whole.



Published September 25, 2007, in *Education Week's Teacher Magazine*

# Hallway Hints

By John Norton

*In excerpts from their e-mail discussion group, members of the Teacher Leaders Network share advice on managing and thriving in the classroom.*

## Let the Students Do the Work

"The fact that the teacher does most of the work at school explains why there is little learning in school," Harry Wong, author of *The First Days of School*, has written. "The research says that the person who does the work is the only one doing the learning."

Teacher Leaders Network member Claudia Swisher, an English teacher from Oklahoma, agrees. "It's amazing how much kids will sit back and let teachers do the work for them," she says. "And if we let it happen, who can blame them? I haven't read my syllabus to my high school students for years. They read it and each student writes a quiz based on the content. They also write a key to the quiz. I collect the quizzes and distribute them. Everyone takes a quiz, then returns it to the 'author' who grades it. By the end, kids have been through the material three times, and I haven't strained my throat or bored the socks off all of us. I always tell my students, 'I wrote it; I don't have to learn it!'"

Ginny White teaches gifted classes in a Florida middle school. She has this sign prominently posted on her classroom wall: My goal this year is for everyone to go home equally tired. "It's a good reminder for me to see on a daily basis," she says. "It prompts me to talk with the kids about shared responsibility for learning and keeps me thinking about ways to make sure I'm clear with them about the what and why of the work, but that they are doing the work."

Another Florida teacher, Mary Anne Kosmoski, shares a timely tip from her student-teacher days nearly 30 years ago. "In 1978, my cooperating teacher looked at me as I labored cutting out letters and pictures for an activity and said, 'Don't ever do something the kids can do.' It was simple advice," Kosmoski says, "but over the years it has saved me thousands of hours, and given my kids many extra opportunities to learn. They have paged through historical photos looking for just the right ones. They have manipulated stencils and found creative ways to divide the labor. They have assumed

responsibility for everything from delivering and recycling newspapers to deciding what needed to go into a first aid kit for a field trip. It has helped develop classroom community and discussions. Sometimes it's just easier to do it yourself. But letting the kids do it is worth it in the long run."

## Plan, Plan, Plan

Wong also tells new teachers, "If you don't have a plan, you're planning to fail."

Kathie Marshall, a literacy coach in the Los Angeles school system, recommends that new teachers plan and prepare two weeks' worth of lessons before the first day of school and then stay well out in front as they find their teaching rhythm. "Getting your timing down takes time to learn, and there are a lot of special issues that pull teachers away from instructional planning in the beginning," she says. "Having your lesson planning done well in advance reduces a lot of unnecessary anxiety."

Ariel Sacks, who's beginning her fourth year in the classroom, couldn't agree more: "For the first week or so of school, the night before each lesson, I actually wrote through everything I planned to say to the students throughout the class period and printed it out for myself. Of course I did not read from the 'script' the next day in front of the kids. I barely even looked at it, but it helped to have thought through the actual words I wanted to use in advance. It allowed me to time the lesson better—to anticipate the details (like how to administer supplies) and the necessary transitions, and how I would direct them."

Sacks, who now coaches new teachers, adds that "beginning teachers often talk too much, even ramble sometimes out of nervousness or lack of a clear vision of what they want. Overplanning helped me avoid this."

Elaine Hawkins, a 35-year veteran from Franklin County, Va., expands on the details of planning. "Always figure out what students will do when they are finished. They complete tasks at different rates. To avoid restless disruptive students, make sure you have something meaningful for students to do while slower students are continuing to work." Well-thought-out transitions are key, she says. "Think through how will you pass out papers with the least amount of down time, how will you collect papers, how you will move from one activity to another when

some students haven't finished and others have been finished for 15 minutes." With careful planning, she concludes, "you will not experience disruptions that will reduce the amount of learning that takes place in your classroom."

## Take Time to Marinate

TLN charter member Marsha Ratzel, who is currently teaching middle school math and science in the Blue Valley, Kansas, school system, says it's also crucial for teachers to learn to be patient. "I'll admit it that I'm very type A personality," she writes, "so when there's a task to be done, I'm pretty much a nose-to-the-grindstone person. In my early years, I taught like a type A teacher. If it was on my schedule for us to accomplish X, Y, and Z on a given day, we pretty much did. I told myself this was acceptable because I had planned out time to have class-building activities. It wasn't just all about task completion."

"The more years I taught," Ratzel recalls, "the more I realized there were times when students needed me to linger. They needed me to tarry so that I could 'hear' them learning. I began to think about this process as marinating; a time for me to soak up the classroom environment. I needed to stop and watch their faces—not only to ensure they understood the concept but to help them celebrate their learning victories. And sometimes they needed reassurance that if they didn't get it today, they'd get it tomorrow. 'Math is hard, but you're smart, so we'll get there.'"

"Learning to marinate in my students' learning changed not only my heart, but it changed my head," she concludes. "It led me away from my urge to organize everything to the 'nth' degree. Today, I'm much more time-inefficient, and that is discomfiting for a type A person. But I believe my students and I have become much more invested as young scientists and mathematicians because I valued them as people first."

## Kids Will Be Kids

When Mary Tedrow began her first year as a "wet behind the ears 22-year-old teacher," she was amazed at how radically kids had changed since she was in high school. "They didn't seem to know much about anything, and it appeared to me that the entire teenage population had suddenly become delinquent," she says.

It took several years, she says, for her ah-ha moment to come. "I realized that the basic behavior of students hasn't changed for eons," she recalls. "I may have avoided some 'types' during my own school days, but kids have remained kids since the beginning of time. For me, that was the beginning of

the end of blaming 'these kids today' for not learning, and accepting more responsibility for the effectiveness of my teaching.

"When I mentor new teachers now," Tedrow says, "I gently try to guide them into seeing each student as a puzzle to be solved rather than a problem requiring me to exert my teacher power. Most behaviors have a genesis that makes sense somewhere along the line. The fun part is trying to figure out what put the behavior in place and then resolving the issue for the student."

Renee Moore, a Mississippi teacher and Carnegie Scholar who works with her husband in his youth ministry, agrees. "We are frequently disabusing adults of the notion that children and teens of today are 'so much worse than we were.' Frankly, if I had been allowed the chance many of these children have to see and do unwholesome things, I would have been any teacher's nightmare. Fortunately, I had a strong, extensive network of adults all around me who reminded me daily that I was going to 'be somebody someday' and what a real responsibility that was."

Moore continues, "Too many of our students do not have such a network, nor a consistent message about what is and is not acceptable behavior. To them everything is relative to one's own selfish whims ('doing what's right for you'). Others are in more tragic situations where they are being abused, neglected, and getting a distorted view of life upon which to build their personal values. Part of the teacher's job is to work to understand each student and what has led them to the behaviors they exhibit."

## Don't Take It Personally, But Make It Personal

Kim McClung, a high school teacher in Kent, Wash., remembers the behavior-management advice she once got from her cooperating teacher: "Never take it personally." And it's easy to take it personally when a kid is confrontational or rude, she says. "We think the anger is directed at us. Instead of getting angry in return, talk to the kid in private and in a caring voice ask him or her what's wrong. Nine times out of 10, that will disarm them and you will find out they had a fight with a parent, or had to go without breakfast, or just broke up with their boyfriend or girlfriend, and have no appropriate outlet for their emotions. They almost always end up apologizing for their behavior."

By using this technique, McClung says, "I find that I very rarely (once or twice a year) have to go to parents or administrators to get help with discipline. Plus, it helps the kids realize that I care about them and am willing to help them with more than reading and writing. Never doubt that this relationship with troubled students is the most im-

portant thing in helping them achieve."

Swisher believes it's also important for teachers to apologize when they make mistakes. "When I 'blow it' with a kid, misunderstand a situation, or overreact, I apologize," she says. "I even shake hands with my student and ask to start over. This really disarms a student who's not used to adults admitting mistakes. I hope I'm doing powerful teaching when I apologize. I think young teachers are afraid apologies will weaken their stance, but I believe it strengthens our relationship."

Susan Graham, a long-time consumer and family sciences teacher, agrees about apologies, with this caveat: "I would apologize once. If the student wants to pursue it beyond that, offer to meet with them after class because it's important that students realize that acknowledging a mistake in instruction or classroom management does not equal relinquishing your authority to direct learning."

Finally, John Holland, a nationally certified pre-school teacher, reminds novice and experienced teachers alike that classroom discipline is not "a zero-sum game." Teachers must be flexible, he says, and remember that "discipline is always about relationships."

Holland recalls a familiar quotation from teacher Haim Ginot that begins, "I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather."

"When I talk to new teachers," Holland says, "I like to follow Ginot's quote with this: A child has a difficult time changing behavior until a behavior has been identified, the child has served a consequence, and they have been forgiven or absolved of their guilt. Otherwise, they will continue to create the infraction in order to be forgiven."

"When children see your joy in teaching and learning, they will learn to be joyous, too," Holland believes. "Teach everywhere, in line for lunch, while waiting to use the bathroom, on the playground, everywhere and anywhere. Have fun. If you love it, they will love it, too."

*As part of a partnership, [teachermagazine.org](http://teachermagazine.org) publishes this regular column by members of the Teacher Leaders Network, a professional community of accomplished educators dedicated to sharing ideas and expanding the influence of teachers.*

*John Norton is the co-founder and moderator of the Teacher Leaders Network.*

*This article was published in Teacher Magazine as part of a partnership with the Teacher Leaders Network.*

*Published Spring/Summer 2008  
in Education Week Digital Directions*

# Blackboard vs. Moodle

## Competition in Course- Management Market Grows

By Andrew Trotter



**Molly Tipton stars  
in a video to introduce  
fellow teachers to  
Moodle's online tools.**

**M**olly Tipton failed at her first try last winter at putting classroom resources and homework assignments online—via a class MySpace page—after parents said they feared their children might get into trouble on the popular social-networking site.

But the 8th grade teacher has had more success this school year, with her second try. Last fall, she started using Moodle, an online course-management system that is stored on the El Paso, Texas, school district's computer server, with access controlled by student passwords.

Through Moodle, Ms. Tipton now posts reading passages and links to Web sites that are related to her lessons. She also has set up a popular online chat room for her students and posts homework assignments online, a feature that students as well as some parents have embraced. Moodle's online capabilities, she said, are making her social studies classes a hybrid between traditional and online courses.

Ms. Tipton is part of a growing number of K-12 educators in regular classrooms who are using course-management systems to share assignments, homework, classroom assessments, and other information with students and their parents. A course-management system is a software program that allows controlled exchanges via the Internet of just about any kind of information related to a course, although the features of individual products differ.

### Blackboard Dominates

Moodle is perhaps the most popular rival to the course-management system sold by Blackboard Inc., the dominant company in the U.S. market for e-learning tools in higher education. The for-profit Washington-based company is trying to expand its foothold in what Blackboard officials call the emerging K-12 market.

Blackboard, which in 2006 bought its main for-profit competitor in higher education, WebCT, says that 400 precollegiate schools or school districts use the full or partial version of its academic product.

The company says it welcomes open-source competitors like Moodle, because interest among schools will help expand the use of course-management systems—a market that company officials believe they will dominate.

Next week, Blackboard is launching an enhanced version for small schools and districts, for an annual flat fee starting at \$10,000, including online hosting and train-

ing of personnel. That rate is substantially lower than what larger institutions pay.

Still, cost remains a formidable obstacle in many school districts, and that's one reason why Moodle is creating a buzz in the school marketplace. The software is free, with a modular design that allows educators to start using a few tools, while working gradually to add more.

The software has been developed over the past nine years by a global community, of both commercial and noncommercial users, led by Moodle, a company based in Perth, Australia. Under the terms of Moodle's open-source license, users or their contractors may use the software on an unlimited number of computers and modify the program to add unique or specially tailored functions at will.

Yet while Moodle is free, it is not without cost. Those costs include computers, networks, and personnel to install and maintain the hardware and software, as well as the cost of training teachers, though some or all of these requirements can be outsourced to outside providers.

"It is free like a puppy, not like a beer," says Trish Hart, a facilitator and instructor at the Alaska Vocational Technical Center, a state-run postsecondary school that uses Moodle extensively.

The school, in Seward, Alaska, offers online courses for students and teachers statewide, including professional-development offerings for secondary school teachers and advanced courses or electives for high school students. The Moodle system is run from a commercial host server in Virginia.

### Other Players

Outside hosts and programming companies specializing in Moodle can provide schools with technical skills that their own technology personnel may lack, though a global community of users can also be tapped for assistance.

Commercial firms offer customized versions of Moodle, as well as hosting services. For example, Moodlerooms, a systems-integration company based in Baltimore, charges schools a fee to create customized versions of Moodle's grade books, repositories of learning resources, warehouses for student data, and tools for real-time learning activities. The company also hosts Moodle systems for schools for an annual fee of \$1 per user.

Moodle is not the only open-source, online course-management system, or CMS. Another is the Sakai Project, a free educational software platform, developed with leadership from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor with an original grant from

the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, based in New York City. The software supports online document distribution, a grade book, discussions, live chats, assignment uploads, and online testing, among other functions.

All told, at least a dozen different online course-management systems are used in schools around the world. Confusion about the term CMS exists, though, in part because of similar and overlapping technologies. They include LMS, or learning-management system; VLE, or virtual-learning environment; and LCMS, or learning-content-management system, among others.

"There are a lot of labels to describe this [market] space," said Jessie Woolley-Wilson, the president of Blackboard K-12.

She said that Blackboard, which began by producing software for managing the operation of online courses, now supports a "mosaic" of functions, including interactive learning; synchronous, or realtime, learning; and asynchronous learning, in which students participate at different times.

"In its most simplistic form, we are focused on delivering an engaging, effective, and increasingly individualized learning experience to learning constituencies, including students, parents, teachers, and administrators," Ms. Woolley-Wilson said.

Blackboard will work with schools, she said, to tailor its product "from 100 percent virtual, which includes data collection and data analysis, to using technology to help lighten the load and help teachers get back to teaching," by helping them create, manage, share, and organize course content.

Amy W. Junker, a senior analyst at Robert W. Baird & Co., an investment-research firm in Milwaukee, said she expects the K-12 market for course-management systems to expand. High schools, in particular, may see them as a way to help prepare students for higher education, where online and hybrid courses are common, she said.

"Certainly we're going to see greater adoption of course-management systems in the K-12 market," Ms. Junker said.

In her view, the ability for teachers to conveniently post homework assignments online—giving busy parents a better ability to keep their youngsters on track—might be the "killer application" that turns the systems into a must-have for many schools.

### Complementary Services

Some companies offer other services that can be added either to Blackboard systems or the open-source alternatives such as Moodle.

For example, Elluminate Inc., a Canadian company that has its U.S. headquarters in

Fort Lauderdale, Fla., provides live Web conferencing that is tailored to school functions, such as professional development for teachers. The live-video capability and moderator tools can be integrated into the use of Moodle or Blackboard.

The new Blackboard School Central service—for schools and districts with no more than 2,000 users—is a more robust package than the Blackboard Gateway product it replaces, but at a comparable price, the company says.

For an annual fee starting at \$10,000, Blackboard will host an e-learning system, with software and training included, for an unlimited number of courses, including professional-development sessions.

The company said it could not provide the price for Blackboard's Academic Suite, the comprehensive e-learning platform used by large districts or higher education institutions; that price is based on many factors, such as student enrollment, the number of users, and the services included. But Ms. Junker, the Baird analyst, said larger institutions typically pay annual fees ranging from \$25,000 to \$75,000 for the full suite.

Ms. Junker said that tightening school budgets and the costs of absorbing the company's acquisitions may mean that even with the new lower-cost offering, Blackboard's growth in the K-12 market will be tempered. She lowered her rating for Blackboard stock in November, advising investors to maintain but not increase their holdings. Still, she said, the company's long-term prospects are bright.

Whatever course-management system they select, of course, busy educators must carve out the time to learn how to use it.

For Ms. Tipton of El Paso, learning how to use Moodle took about a day of practice last summer.

Soon afterward, she starred in an instructional video that introduces educators to Moodle, which the 64,000-student district made to interest other El Paso teachers. The video is also posted on the TeacherTube and YouTube video-sharing Web sites.

Ms. Tipton has plans to ramp up her own use of Moodle, first by putting podcasts of her lessons on her Moodle site to give students another avenue for learning class material, among other ideas.

She also is looking for grants to buy a classroom set of 30 laptop computers, so her students can use Moodle in class without going to the computer lab. And she plans to help train other teachers in the district.

But those projects will have to wait till summer, she said: "Once the school year has started, we have no time to try anything new."

## What Is a CMS?

EDUCAUSE, a nonprofit group that promotes the use of information technology in education, provided a definition of course-management systems in a paper on the topic prepared in 2003 by the group's Emerging Technologies Committee.

*"At its simplest, a course-management system is a tool that allows an instructor to post information on the Web without that instructor having to know or understand HTML or other computer languages. A more complete definition of a CMS is that it provides an instructor with a set of tools and a framework that allows the relatively easy creation of online course content and the subsequent teaching and management of that course including various interactions with students taking the course."*

## CMS Features

The Teacher Education Center at Illinois State University notes that most online course-management systems include:

- Announcements
- Calendar
- Gradebook
- Asynchronous discussion boards
- Synchronous chat room
- E-mailing (internal) and/or external accounts
- Online journal
- Whiteboard
- Dropbox
- Document sharing, including digital pictures, audio, and streaming video
- Team areas that include tools for collaboration, managed by instructor
- Quiz, test, and survey options
- User-activity reports

SOURCES: EDUCAUSE; Illinois State University

Published February 4, 2004, in *Education Week*

# To Jon, on His First Year of Teaching

By Jim Delisle

## A proud uncle shares 11 classroom tips.

Dear Jon,

*I just heard the good news that you were hired as a 9th grade math teacher. Congratulations. As your uncle, I'm proud that you are joining the profession of teaching, one in which I have been happily involved since before your birth. If all goes well, you should be eligible for tenure the same year I will retire. The cycle continues.*

*I've put a little gift in this envelope that you may want to use to buy start-up supplies for your classroom. I also wanted to give you something less tangible but more valuable. I hesitate to call it advice, so I'll simply label it "experiences from the trenches." After 27 years in multiple K-12 and college classrooms, I've learned a few things not available in any textbook. If even one of these observations makes your first year of teaching more pleasurable or fulfilling, I'll be glad.*

### Think management, not discipline.

At the top of every new teacher's list of worries is classroom control, a legitimate concern. When you're young and fresh, you are, in the eyes of some students, vulnerable. Some new teachers believe that if they make their classroom rules as long as a yardstick, and consequences for misbehavior punitive and embarrassing, they will have few problems. They're wrong.

Kids misbehave in class because what teachers are asking them to do is either too easy, too hard, irrelevant, or boring. I have learned that teachers who know their material and how to present it, who relate the content to students' lives, plan twice as much material as they think they will need for a lesson, and return students' work promptly and free of red ink (use green or black ink, instead) have few discipline problems. Classroom control is a matter of engagement. If you love what you do, and show this to students daily, you are conveying respect for their minds and time—and most of them will engage you back.

### Students are only as anxious to learn as you are excited to teach.

I've yet to meet a student or teacher who wakes up on the first day of school and thinks, "I'm really looking forward to having an awful year." Human nature dictates that we pursue pleasure and avoid pain; this is as true in school as it is in relationships. And school is a relationship—a yearlong dance with unknown partners we eventually get to know over 180 days. Try to enter your classroom each day with a smile and a positive attitude. For kids who find few such attributes elsewhere, you may be the highlight of their day.

### Get to know at least one teacher that the kids dislike and the staff avoids.

Every school has them, and yours will, too: the people who can empty the teachers'

lounge simply by walking in. This teacher is sour, bitter, tired ... and in need of a colleague. Engage this person in a conversation about his or her first years of teaching. Ask why he or she chose this profession and what pleasures are still derived from it. Ask for guidance about how to teach a concept or relate to a reluctant learner. At first, you'll probably be regarded skeptically, by both this teacher and your colleagues. But persevere. You may be surprised that even the most grizzled old-timer has much to share with an upstart willing to listen.

### Be aware of educational trends and standards ... and then close your door and teach.

The pressures of accountability, high-stakes testing, and the latest educational panacea unleashed by university researchers are much greater than in my era. Your job, as a first-year teacher, will be harder by far than mine was. But if you let these "trends" overshadow what you believe students really need to learn from you, your creativity will get stifled and you'll be looking at a new career within five years.

You became a teacher to have an impact on lives, and you can do this best by avoiding worksheets, workbooks, and mindless homework assignments—the kind that you avoided doing as a student. These rote and tiresome methods prepare students for neither the tests they'll take nor the lives they'll lead. Use the hands-on methods of teaching you learned about in college and engage students in real-world application of the mathematical principles they encounter in their daily lives. In doing so, you will bolster both their appreciation for and knowledge of mathematics.

### If you don't try too hard to get your students to like you, they probably will.

It's an unstated but understandable goal of almost every new teacher: "I want my students to like me." Ironically, the more you try to get them to do this, the less successful you'll be. Since you are the adult in the school closest to them in age, your students will be curious and interested in what you do when you leave school at day's end. But remember, when they ask "Do you have a girlfriend?" or "Do you like to party?" it is appropriate to remind them they are treading on personal turf and that you prefer not to answer. Instead of becoming "a buddy" to your students, treat them with respect while teaching them content that is meaningful. When you do this, something magical happens: They begin to like you.

## Trust your principal.

You may fear a classroom visit from your principal for the same reason you don't like going to the dentist: You expect pain. However, the old adage that "the principal is your pal" is more than a cute spelling mnemonic, it's the truth. More than anyone else in your building, your principal is invested in your having a great first year. During the next few months, you'll be evaluated at least once—perhaps more often—and the principal probably will conduct this observation. Talk to him or her before (way before) your first observation; ask for advice, share a success, or simply meet to get to know one another a little better. Then, when the observation occurs, ask your principal to be alert to a particular student or situation that is giving you trouble. You're still a teaching novice, and your principal is there to guide you to the next level. Remember, in teaching as in life, less than perfection is more than acceptable.

## Use your judgment, yet follow your instincts.

When you became a licensed teacher, you also became a "mandated reporter." This means that you have both a legal and an ethical responsibility to report any child abuse or neglect that you observe or even suspect in a student. It's not a job that any of us likes, yet it is one of the most important roles we assume: guardianship for students unable to defend themselves. As a young teacher, you may have students who gravitate to you, opening their hearts and mouths simultaneously. If you hear "My dad beats me," or "Look at this cigarette burn my mom gave me last night," this is not information you can keep to yourself. You must report this directly to whatever child-welfare agency is in your city or county.

Of course, not all students are forthcoming verbally, so if you notice a dramatic change in a student's behavior or attitude, try to determine its cause. Tell the student (privately) about the change you've seen, and ask if there is something bothering her. Speak with the school counselor about your concerns. What you are seeing may be nothing more than adolescent angst over a messy breakup, but it's still worth exploring. The result of not doing so could be disastrous, for both you and your student.

## Communicate with parents prior to conferences.

As a new and young teacher without kids of your own, you have an uphill battle to achieve parental credibility. You may be the same age (or younger) than some parents' older children, and your insights and recommendations will be perceived differently from how they would be if you were 20 years older. Not fair, perhaps, but reality. So, to counter-

act this age discrimination, I suggest contacting parents of especially strong or troublesome students as early in the year as you notice a trend in their behavior or classroom performance. A quick e-mail, phone call, or informal note will suffice, as the communication itself is what's important, not its form.

If at all possible, make your first home communication a positive one—parents get too few messages that their kids are well-behaved or working hard. When this is not possible, try to uncover a way to make parents understand that it is your job to teach their child, but the child's responsibility to make himself open to learning. Then get as specific as possible with techniques you have tried, asking for any suggestions the parent can provide. Doing these trickier (and, at times, unpleasant) communications prior to scheduled conferences shows that you are willing to work with your students to achieve their ultimate success.

## College graduation was the beginning of your learning, not its end.

I know, the last thing you want to hear after four-plus years of college is that you need to continue your education. But as a professional, that's your job. You don't necessarily need another degree right away, but take advantage of any opportunity you get to interact with other teachers at educational conferences. These are tight budget times, so you may not be jetting off to a national conference.

The farthest you travel might be to the school next door on an in-service day. Whatever the setting, try to find something useful in what you hear. Too many teachers pooh-pooh staff development as a waste of time, a mind-numbing day of hard chairs and stale doughnuts. Be wise enough not to listen to them and, instead, seek out colleagues who genuinely enjoy an intellectual interchange of ideas.

## Contribute to the school community, but learn how to say no.

As the new kid on the block, you may be asked to serve on school committees, coach a sport, advise a club, or participate in some other ways that go beyond the school day time clock. Trust me, these are wonderful opportunities for you to get to know both students and staff members better. But as a first-year teacher, you'll probably be spending more time on lesson plans and grading papers than many of your colleagues who are veteran educators. This is as it should be; as you are still learning the ropes they mastered long ago. If you find yourself devoting so much time to school-related activities that you haven't got time for yourself, or (even worse) if you find yourself chipping away at your lesson-planning because of

track practice each afternoon, then it's time for something to go. Guess what that something should be? If you are doing things right as a first-year teacher, you'll be continually tired and catching up, even without extracurricular involvement. So learn to say no without feeling guilty. You'll have plenty of years ahead to coach basketball.

## Remember that you will never again have a first year of teaching.

When you walk into your classroom on the first day of school, you'll be hit with a numbing reality: You have no idea how to set up a seating chart. Or, perhaps you'll be clueless about "how tardy is tardy," or on what to do when a student on your class list isn't there, even though another student says, "I saw Jamil in the hall five minutes ago." In other words, whatever you learned in college about teaching probably didn't include the day-to-day mechanics with which we all contend. If you're like most beginners, you'll think to yourself, "Am I up to this?" The answer is yes. You've been preparing for this day for years and now that it's here, it will surprise you to learn what you don't know. Welcome to the club. You'll learn. And by October, everything that seemed overwhelming that first week will merge into a comfortable routine. It sounds odd, but cherish this confusion, because you will never have another first year of teaching. And just so you know, the second year is a lot smoother.

Forgive me for being long-winded, but I thought 11 tips should get you started. Why 11, instead of 10, like the Commandments? Call it a metaphor of sorts. Eleven is a prime number; it can only be divided by one and itself. In a similar way, the only thing that can divide you from your goal of becoming an outstanding teacher is the idea that everything must be perfect from Day 1.

Get ready to learn that not every lesson will go well, that some experiences will frustrate and disappoint. But get ready, too, for your students to leave you on that last day of school with a handshake, a smile, and a few wry comments to the effect that you "didn't do too bad for a new guy."

You have entered a remarkable, timeless profession, the only career that allows you to reinvent yourself every single August. I wish you well.

*Jim Delisle is a professor of education at Kent State University and a part-time teacher at R.B. Chamberlin Middle School in Twinsburg, Ohio. His books include Barefoot Irreverence: Critical Issues in Gifted Child Education (Prufrock Press) and When Gifted Kids Don't Have All the Answers: Meeting Their Social and Emotional Needs (Free Spirit). He wrote this letter to his nephew, Jonathan Delisle, who teaches at Keene High School, in Keene, N.H.*

*Published May 28, 2008, in Education Week's Teacher Magazine*

# The Miracle of Choices

By Mary Tedrow

**E**ver heard a simple truth? They're easy to spot. Something about the simplicity is appealing and the statement sounds, well, just right. I heard one of these truths when I was at home with two small children. A television psychologist advised against asking newly independent two-year-olds a 'yes' or 'no' question. At that age, the answer is always "NO!"

His strategy: Instead of asking "Do you want to go outside?" try "Do you want to go out the front door or the back door?"

It was brilliant—and simple! Just by offering a choice between two equally acceptable answers, the two-year-old asserts his coveted independence and contemplates the options. And, best of all, he's outside before he knows it. Unfortunately, it was years before the miracle of choice became my preferred tool for motivating high school students.

For the most part, the concept is the same: Let them decide. I use these toddler tactics in my English and journalism classes, but I suspect they would carry over into many other subjects (and grades), with a little adaptation.

## What Does Choice Look Like?

*Here's a sampling of ways I offer my students choices:*

- After writing several essays, all of which earn completion grades, students choose one to revise for a test grade.
- In persuasive writing, I ask students to pick a columnist from the newspaper or online to follow for four weeks, turning in the column and a rhetorical précis. They can choose among sports columnists, movie, fashion or theater critics, car or product reviewers, or right- or left-leaning political commentators. Their follow-up assignment is to mimic the columnist in an essay on an issue of their choice.
- In silent reading, I let students

choose a nonfiction title from a list provided. They later write personal responses to the reading.

- For summer programs, students must read a required book for class to earn a C. Then they decide what grade to earn by choosing one additional title (from lists provided) for a B, or a third title for an A.
- For a personal essay, story or sketch, I ask students to choose the topic, genre, and audience from the material they've accumulated in their writer's notebook.

## How Does Choice Help Students?

Choice returns responsibility for learning to the student. Most of my students choose surprisingly well for themselves, selecting texts

and assignments that follow their interests while meeting curricular objectives and pushing skills to the next level. The first year I offered a reading list, I was amazed to see how students gravitated to titles reflecting their cultures or family histories. The scientists, sports addicts, adventurers, and budding social scientists all found acceptable books they were willing to tackle.

*Giving students the power to choose has other benefits. For example:*

- It requires that students make a number of decisions they'd otherwise concede to us. As teachers, we have vast decision-making experience already. Why not let them gain some?

- It's not difficult to arrange tasks so students cannot even make a choice without doing a little outside research (as with the columnist assignment). Extra critical thinking is always a plus.

- Choice creates opportunities for students to showcase themselves. My students start with what they already know and move into unfamiliar territory by applying a new skill in a zone of relative comfort.

- Often, by making choices that matter to them, students discover that school can have an immediate application in their lives. Also, other students begin to see peers as in-house experts on certain topics and learn to know their classmates beyond a surface stereotype.

### How Does Choice Help Teachers?

- It's differentiation at its best.
- Choice helps me see my students as individuals.

- Choice makes reading and grading student work more interesting. You're not plowing through a seemingly endless stack of papers on the exact same theme.

- The choices students make can help me direct outside reading and thinking. Handing a student an unexpected book review,

Web resource, or newspaper article in their area of interest often surprises them, but it may spark further study or open the door to an adult conversation around their topic.

- Every time an assignment involves choice, the "chatter-level" in the classroom rises. Choice releases energy and increases buy-in. They learn more and you manage less. As an added bonus, in an era when we're always looking for ways to engage parents, students frequently carry their assignments home, discussing possibilities with family members.

### How Do You Manage Choice?

*Before my students run off into the broad landscape of choice, we set some boundaries and guidelines.*

- For longer-term projects, each student must request permission to follow a particular subject. I use a memorandum addressed to me (a chance to teach a little business writing) in which they request class time to pursue their stated interest. I explain, like in the business world, time is money, and they need to account for their time. The students present a rationale, what they know already, what questions they intend to pursue, and what they hope to gain from the project.

- If the choice is approved, I note it on a grade book printout kept in the classroom. In a written response, I point students to sources or ask questions they may not have considered.

- Occasionally a choice is not approved—most often because the student has not understood the assignment goals. After a side discussion, the memo is resubmitted and approved. (The memo's secret purpose, of course, is to serve as a tool for focusing student inquiry.)

- There are stated deadlines for various aspects of the assignment. I provide other rubrics and in-class lessons to help students focus on quality and curricular goals.

### A Few Cautions

Offering teenagers a choice unsettles two kinds of students. The high achievers adept at following "rules" are flummoxed by a wide-open field. "Which choice will give me an A?" can be their overriding concern. On the other hand, highly scripted low achievers often lack the skills and knowledge to make good choices and will flounder unless supports are in place. Instructors should be prepared to scaffold these students into the process of inquiry.

I always devote class time to helping students brainstorm for possibilities, explore options, and share ideas. Several professional development resources can assist in structuring the brainstorming sessions in class. Writing teacher Barry Lane's books often include a chapter on developing questions that can help teachers guide productive classroom discussions and jump-start student interest.

### The Front Door or the Back Door?

Choice, it turns out, is a beautiful thing, whether you're a "terrible two" or a teen on the brink of adulthood. Pump life into your curriculum by letting kids decide. Once they find a question they want to answer, they'll be outside exploring the wide, wide world before they know it.

*As part of a partnership, teacher magazine.org publishes this regular column by members of the Teacher Leaders Network, a professional community of accomplished educators dedicated to sharing ideas and expanding the influence of teachers.*

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*This article was published in Teacher Magazine as part of a partnership with the Teacher Leaders Network.*

*Published December 3, 2008, in Education Week's Teacher Magazine*

# Taming the Dragon of Classroom Chaos

By Cossondra George

**M**y classroom is not neat and tidy like some. It has that homey, lived-in, much-loved look. The tables are never quite in straight lines, the computer cords are twisted and tangled, and my teacher desk looks like a recycling center exploded on top of it.

When you are inherently disorganized, life's simplest tasks can be overwhelming. I am a person who, left to my own devices, would simply suffocate under the piles of stuff that accumulate around me. Fortunately, I am not ashamed to admit this character flaw, and I search for tools and tricks that will help me exorcise the mighty dragon of classroom chaos—or at least force him to stay in his cave.

Over the years I have collected ideas from many teachers I have met in real and virtual spaces. While some of these strategies work well for them but not for me, others suit my teacher personality. I've managed to piece together enough tools to keep my classroom running fairly smoothly.

**Here are my top 10 “stolen” organization secrets. They're really only borrowed and you're welcome to borrow any that might work for you.**

**1. Have specific places for students to turn in work.** I use plastic stackable baskets with bold clear labels for each class period. This stops students from tossing a paper onto my desk and having it sucked into the black hole, never to be seen again.

**2. Have a designated place for absent students to collect their work when they return to school.** The last thing I do each day before leaving school is take care of work for absentees. I look at my attendance book and identify each student who was not present in each class period. I put exactly what we did that day—with any homework and handouts—in a basket marked both with ABSENT WORK and the

particular class period. This puts the primary responsibility on the student, who knows my expectation that he or she will find the appropriate basket and act accordingly. It makes my life easier; if the question “What did I miss yesterday?” is asked, I point.

**3. Have a NO NAME folder.** Unless you teach in Lake Wobegon, your students will, on occasion, turn in work without their name. Certainly, my middle schoolers will! Later, when they note a missing assignment, you can ask: “Did you check the No Name folder?” I frequently hold up my red No Name folder with a declaration like, “Mr. No Name has an A in math! Do you?”

**4. Use an online grading program.** If your district does not use something like Pearson's PowerSchool student information system (the one we use), fight to get it. Such systems make it possible to share grades and other information via the Internet with students and parents. This makes for fewer parent phone calls, fewer students asking questions about their grades, less time spent preparing lists of missing assignments, and best of all, no last-minute panic at report card time. Parents and students appreciate having instant access to what is missing and what is due. But do not get behind on grading. You expect students to turn work in on time; have the courtesy to assess and return that work promptly. And frankly, I find myself much more accountable when grades are posted for parents to view.

**5. Have a board in the hall outside your classroom where you write what students need for class each period.**

This method of reminding students what to bring each day helps teach them to be organized. Students can be overwhelmed with different classes and different teachers. Thinking of everything they'll need for the next hour during the four minutes between classes can be tough. A quick glance tells them whether they need their book, reminds them what homework is due, and helps them get it all together in a hurry.

**6. Write the day's lesson for each class period on the board.** This solves the perpetual "What are we doing today?" question as well as focuses you and your students on the task at hand. I can take a quick look at the list to know what is next in my lesson plan. Students who are leaving for an afternoon appointment can poke their head in during the morning break to see what they will miss. Also, write reminders for the week and other notes on the board so kids learn to look there for important information. Help them learn to be responsible and plan ahead. Help them begin to tame the dragon.

**7. Expect students to come to class prepared.** I do not allow them to leave the room to get calculators, pencils, etc. I loan pencils, paper, textbooks, etc., and they are all in a designated area of the classroom. I do not loan calculators, but can set the tone for this by repeating, "If you really wanted it, you would have brought it to class." Time in the hall is wasted time, so I do not give students an excuse to leave. It becomes a non-issue as students learn to check the "What do I need for class?" board and realize I am not going to let them go wandering.

**8. Keep seating charts handy.** Put the charts on a lectern or other accessible location so you can take attendance in a split second as students are completing the class starter, a task written on the board to get their minds into gear. Mine also serve as rosters for fire drills, since I don't have a portable grade book, and they are invaluable for substitute teachers. Our attendance is required to be posted online within the first 10 minutes of class, so I transfer it as soon as the bell rings.

**9. Use email for parent contacts whenever possible.** This saves time and makes it easy to keep a "paper" trail. Parents appreciate the ease of contact. Talk to parents early on—establish a positive relationship before there are problems. Send them a positive email about something you notice about their student. Those positives are like money in the bank when you do encounter a discipline problem later in the year. And, from an organizational point of view, these upbeat notes encourage the practice of communicating by email.

**10. Let go of the things that don't really matter.** My first years in the classroom, I spent hours organizing my classroom-based library. When students returned books, I had to put the checkout cards back and re-shelve books in their appropriate location. A couple of years ago, I decided: Enough of that! Now students know my books are not organized. If they want a book, they will have to dig for it. It is almost like a treasure hunt. Books in order may matter to you, but for me, those are hours better spent on other things. Examine your own classroom for those details that you can bring yourself to let go.

**A**mid the chaos that is my classroom, a sharp observer will see these little islands of organization, floating in the clutter and disarray. My students and I spend our time together engaged in learning, and for the most part, things run smoothly. If you suffer as I do from chronic disorganization, I'm betting that your classroom could benefit from these helpful stolen ideas.

I keep wishing for a magic wand full of organizational fairy dust, but until then, these simple strategies will have to do.

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*This article was published in Teacher Magazine as part of a partnership with the Teacher Leaders Network.*

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Published by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc.  
6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100  
Bethesda, MD, 20814  
Phone: (301) 280-3100  
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